

Yom Kippur 5778: Living Our Fullest Lives

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During my freshman orientation week at Columbia and the Jewish Theological Seminary, our class of 48 students was taken to see the Broadway hit show “Rent”. I’d heard of it, but didn’t know anything about it. I hadn’t heard any of the music--not like today, when you can literally memorize the entire soundtrack to Hamilton before you ever splurge on tickets 2 years out. And so, watching this incredible show in the darkened Nederlander Theatre, next to some of the folks who would become my closest friends, I was blown away by the banner song, “Seasons of Love.” Remember how it goes?

“Five hundred twenty-five thousand
Six hundred minutes
Five hundred twenty-five thousand
Moments so dear
Five hundred twenty-five thousand
Six hundred minutes
How do you measure - measure a year?”

The show, you probably know, takes place between one Christmas eve and another, and tells the stories of a group of struggling young artists who are dealing with a host of issues, including HIV/AIDS and, of course, death. With the shadow of disease hanging over this group of Bohemian friends, there is a deep awareness that each year matters. Each day, each minute matters.

Although different in form and in content, this is the same message our tradition presents to us on this day of Yom Kippur. Each year, each day, each minute--they matter deeply. It matters how we spend that time because, as we are reminded throughout this day of Atonement--throughout the high holiday season as a whole--it's finite. One of the beautiful poems of these holidays, which we find in the Musaf Amidah, reminds us that adam yesodo me'afar, v'sof l'afar, "Each person's origin is dust, and each person will return to dust". More well-known, of course, is the liturgy just a page earlier: B'Rosh HaShanah yikatevun, uv'Yom Tzom Kippur yechatemun; mi yichyeh, umi yamut. "On Rosh HaShanah it is written, and on Yom Kippur it is sealed. Who will live and who will die?" Whether you relate to the machzor's imagery of God sitting as prosecutor and defendant and judge and scribe as each of us sheep pass below the staff--or not--there's really no disputing the ultimate truth at the heart of this prayer: We have a limited number of days on this earth, with those we love and care about, and we simply don't know if this year might be our last.

Now, if the words of our tefillot aren't quite enough to get us thinking, there are the do's and don't's of this holiest day that help drive the message home. Many of us are dressed in white--whether our regular clothing or a white kittel or tallit--resembling the white shrouds that we will be dressed in prior to burial. We refrain from eating and drinking, from anointing ourselves with perfume or cologne, from sexual intimacy, and from attending to our regular hygiene. These are things that are integral to human life, and unnecessary after death. In essence, this is a day when we enact our own deaths. By

freeing ourselves from our bodily needs for these 25 hours, we can focus without distraction on the demands of our souls, on this annual opportunity to clean the slate and right our path.

But the truth is that we don't need to wait until Yom Kippur to engage in the self-reflection that leads to teshuvah, repentance. In fact, the Talmud contains a teaching of Rabbi Eliezer, a prominent 1st-century rabbi, on the topic of timely repentance.

Rabbi Eliezer said: "Repent one day before your death."

His disciples asked him, "Does then one know on what day he will die?"

"All the more reason he should repent today, lest he die tomorrow".¹

And our liturgy complies with Rabbi Eliezer's recommendation. Each and every weekday Amidah contains a blessing that asks God, Who desires repentance, to bring us back in complete repentance.

וְהִחְזִירֵנוּ בְּתַשׁוּבָה שְׁלֵמָה לְפָנֶיךָ.

If we're paying attention, and if we take this concept seriously, we have several opportunities each and every day to examine our actions and take note of what must change.

But even if we engage in daily prayer, Yom Kippur still holds a special power for us, perhaps because we experience this day as a full collective Jewish community, not in isolation. And that same prayer, Untaneh Tokef, provides

¹ Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Shabbat 153a

the answer to its own question of “who will live and who will die?” It’s not a list of individuals, but rather the simple formula reminding us that each day, each minute matters: Uteshuvah, utefillah, utzedakah maavirin et-roa hagezerah; “Repentance, prayer, and acts of lovingkindness mitigate the evil decree.”

I have a feeling that this punchline doesn’t feel like much of a revelation. I mean, we recite them on these 3 days each and every year. But I’d like us to think about these actions slightly differently--as things we can do each day to elevate our experiences and, in turn, add new layers of meaning to our lives. We can turn away from mistakes and and re-turn to a better version of ourselves; we can engage in introspection and prayer; and we can be on the lookout for opportunities to help others. The question is: Do we, right now, take these concepts seriously? Do we actually do everything we can to make the most of every minute, every day?

I’d like to share a little bit about 3 individuals who I truly believe held this attitude toward life and understood the value of Teshuvah, tefillah, and Tzedakah.

I do so with trepidation, as 2 of them left this world within the last 2 weeks and the death of one of them , 8 years later, still hurts to recall.

Rafi and I were admitted to JTS Rabbinical School on the same day, after in-person interviews with a committee in Jerusalem, where we were both studying for a year after college. We went out to the only kosher Irish bar in

town to celebrate--beer and wings. I'd have been fine with falafel, but Rafi was passionate about meat--as he was about everything in life. That year, we got to know each other by studying together for our class in Chasidut, or chasidic thought and literature. Rafi was the son of a rabbi, and their whole family was so steeped in chasidic stories that they each radiated a deeply spiritual aura; I learned a lot from him as we worked our way through many spiritual teachings. I can still picture his smiling eyes, his curly reddish hair, a big knit kippah proclaiming his devotion to the Divine, his passionate shuckling during prayer, and his pure happiness as he dug into a big meat meal at Ben's Kosher Deli--his fave. Rafi's passion extended to his friendships, political conversations, and to the love of his life, our friend Sara Beth. They were engaged to be married--the wedding was to be in February of our last year of rabbinical school.

It turns out that Rafi also had a medical condition--to this day, I don't know what it was. I don't know whether he knew his time was limited. On his way out the door from his brother's engagement party, Rafi took a tumble, broke several bones, and ended up in a coma. His family, his fiancée, all his friends, all of our classmates--we spent Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur of 2009 praying with every bone in our bodies that Rafi be granted more time. Rafi died the day after Yom Kippur, and his funeral was the very saddest I've ever attended, with hundreds of heartbroken people wailing throughout the packed sanctuary.

Brenda Cooper was a member of our congregation for decades (49 years!), but most of us don't remember her, as she outlived most of her peers. Brenda

died 2 weeks ago, at age 96, satisfied with her life and proud of her 3 children, 4 grandchildren, and a baby great-granddaughter, with one more on the way. But I share about Brenda today not only because of her wonderful family, but because she pursued a passion of hers--singing--all the way to the Met, the New York City Opera, and Broadway. The evening after her funeral, I was at her home in Westport for shiva--the only non-family member--and her grandson asked me to stay so I could view the montage he'd put together about his Bubby. Although they'd all viewed it earlier that day, everyone sat down, eager to watch again. I was stunned. Every black-and-white video clip, there was Brenda--her face expressive, her powerful soprano voice trilling with emotion. She so clearly enjoyed being front and center, bringing music and drama to the masses.

All of a sudden, I could see what she'd been describing to me for 2 years in our visits and conversations, sitting together in her living room, her withered body tucked neatly into the corner of the couch, her vocal chords shaky from so many years of wear and tear. With the classic clarity that accompanied her until her last days, Brenda shared how proud she was that she'd made the most of her career and her life.

And the kicker about Brenda is that she wasn't just an opera diva. The woman was the most well-read, intellectually deep and diverse, person I've met. She carried on conversations with anyone on any topic. She'd read the entire New York Times front to back before I'd stop by in the early afternoon. And she was passionate about being Jewish, about the Jewish future. Brenda made a generous gift to Beth El last year, to be used to nurture our Jewish youth, and we are indebted to her for that. Unlike Rafi, her life was a full one. But it

brought to an end an extraordinary, beautiful life, one that might inspire us on this day.

Eyal was my age--36--when he died on Sunday. He was the older brother of my classmate in college and rabbinical school, Erez, and although I never met him, Erez and his family brought Eyal's story everywhere they went. Eyal suffered a devastating stroke at age 4 after surgery to remove a brain-stem tumor, and he spent his life in a wheelchair, a quadriplegic. It's easy to describe Eyal by his limitations--he couldn't walk, speak with sound, or swallow.

But that's not why I'm telling you about Eyal. I'm telling you about him because he lived an extraordinary life under extraordinary conditions, and it wasn't easy. Eyal learned to communicate by moving his lips, and his parents and 4 siblings learned to understand. He learned to type by tapping his chin. At age 13, Eyal celebrated his Bar Mitzvah on the bimah in his father's shul, mouthing the words of his Torah reading while congregants watched the yad follow the words on a large projector screen. Eyal graduated from high school and, after 10 years of attending college classes--his mom Leah at his side, taking notes--he graduated with a degree in fine arts, with high honors. And lest we think that Eyal's extraordinary limitations prevented him from developing hobbies, I must share with you that Eyal became an artist, gripping the paintbrush with his teeth and giving life to the images inside his head. He particularly loved painting flowers, which he said "would stay with you forever". And, like the rest of his family, Eyal was a die-hard Syracuse basketball fan.

Back in 2010, in an NBC interview, Eyal's father, Rabbi Chuck Sherman, said: "You just don't know. This is why our philosophy is that 'we have this today. Celebrate today. Love today. Affirm today. This is the way we've been able to get through this thing.'" Even as his family is deep in mourning for Eyal, they continue to share his story widely, as their son and brother, with his extraordinary will and beautiful soul, was a hero to each of them.

Rafi z"l.

Brenda z"l.

Eyal z"l.

No doubt, Rafi and Eyal had much more living to do, and their deaths are tragic losses for their families and friends. And while Brenda's life was full, her death is still a blow to her family and to our community. All 3 were unique, full of passion. Each made the most of each day, each year of their lives. On this day of Yom Kippur, can we say the same about ourselves? If not, what might we change tomorrow, this year, so that we have a different answer next Yom Kippur?

"Five hundred twenty-five thousand

Six hundred minutes

How do you measure - measure a year?"

In the show "Rent", the answer is:

"In daylights - in sunsets

In midnights - in cups of coffee

In inches - in miles
In laughter - in strife
In - five hundred twenty-five thousand
Six hundred minutes
How do you measure
A year in the life
How about love? ... Measure in love.”

Yes, our tradition values love--of self, of others, and of God--but on this day we lift up other ways of measuring.

Teshuvah, tefillah, tzedakah. Teshuvah--where in your life does a relationship need repairing? What patterns have you fallen into that you'd rather not repeat in the coming year? Tefillah--What spiritual commitments are you making on this day, to yourself or, perhaps, to God? Does coming to morning minyan play a part? Taking on a practice of tallit or tefillin? Saying the Shma each day? How will you convert those commitments into practice? And Tzedakah--How will you give of yourself to others this year? Will it be with your time? Your skills? With traditional tzedakah donations?

Wherever you gravitate, make 1 new commitment this Yom Kippur. These sacred acts won't erase the fact that our time is limited, but our engagement in them does heighten the quality of our days. May our spiritual work on this Yom Kippur merit for each of us a year, a life, of which we are proud.